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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how teachers of young children who are also mothers of young children perceived and dealt with problems in their dual role. Three specific questions were addressed: (1) How do teacher/mothers perceive the interaction between the two roles? (2) What positive and negative effects does each of the two roles have on the performance of the other? and (3) What have teacher/mothers learned that can be shared with other teachers? Answers were sought in a longitudinal, ethnographic study involving 18 female kindergarten through third-grade teachers in a metropolitan area in the Southeast. The study yielded three major conclusions related to the perceived effects of the dual role on teaching and mothering. The two roles were found to complement each other, and their interaction was mainly beneficial. Five distinct advantages were identified. Expectations involving both roles were seen as ambiguous or, in certain circumstances, unrealistically high. Ten specific problem areas involved in the interaction between the roles were identified. Finally, it was found that living with the dual role provided possibilities to gain insight and to learn strategies for coping with and benefiting from both roles. Six such strategies were prevalent. (RH)

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TEACHER/MOTHERS:

PROBLEMS OF A DUAL ROLE

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Objectives

The aim of this paper is to describe how teachers of young children who are also mothers of young children (teacher/mothers) perceive their dual role and solve the problems of being both teachers and mothers. More specifically, (a) how do teacher/mothers perceive the interaction between the two roles, (b) what positive and negative effects do each of the two roles have on the performance of the other, and (c) what have these persons learned that can be shared with other teachers?

Perspectives

The number of mothers of young children in the labor force has increased dramatically during the last decade. From 1970 to 1984, the number of mothers in the labor force with children under six years of age almost doubled (5.6 millions in 1970 to 9.3 millions in 1984) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1985). A similar increase has probably occurred in the number of teachers of young children who are also mothers of young children. These teacher/mothers are special in several ways: (a) they spend most of their awake hours in the company of and caring for children, (b) they have years of experience with the individual differences of children both at school and at home, and (c) they simultaneously experience both sides of parent-school issues. By virtue of occupying both roles it can be assumed that they have gained experience and knowledge that transcend occupying only one of the two roles.

There is a vast amount of literature concerning both the teacher role and the parent role, and expert advice is plentiful about how teachers should teach and how parents should parent. It is also well known that relations between parents and teachers in regard to the schooling of children have often been tense and difficlut. In the 1930's, Waller (1932) pointed to the antagonistic relationship between parents and teachers, noting the often mutual distrust and hostility. He observed that both parties wish the child well, but according to different standards of well being. The lack of clear boundaries between the roles of teachers and parents concerning the control over the education and socialization of children has been mentioned as one factor in the adverse relationship (Lightfoot, 1978; Lortie, 1975; McPherson, 1972).

In contrast, we know little about how persons who are both teachers and parents perceive the effects of the dual role. What are the effects of being with children 24 hours a day? What positive and negative aspects are there? The literature points to some effects. A teacher who is a mother may, according to McPherson (1972): (a) expect less of parents of pupils, (b) be able to separate the roles without any problems, and (c) be more demanding of her own children. Katz (1980) proposed that a teacher/mother may: (a) expect more of herself and her own children, (b) be embarrased about being more emotional with her own children, and (c) be more patient and less defensive towards parents who want special favors for their children. Lighfoot (1978) suggested that a teacher/mother may: (a) be more insightful about what goes on in schools, and therefore may

be more attuned to what her child's teacher needs to know about her child, (b) be more sensitive to the needs of her child's teacher for control and autonomy within the classroom, and (c) be less emotionally inseparable from her own child.

Role theory can be a useful tool to define and understand the reactions and behavior of teachers and parents (McPherson, 1975). A role can be defined as a cluster of expectations held toward the occupant of a particular social position (Merton, 1957; Gross, 1958). The earlier literature on role theory assumed that role strain, that is role overload and role conflict, were inevitable results of aquisition of multiple roles (e.g. Goode, 1960; Gross, 1958; Merton 1957). Kanter (1977) noted that men, interestingly enough, have traditionally been assumed to be able to integrate all their roles successfully. Employed women on the other hand, were seen as having problems with assuming multiple roles (p. 20). More recent theoretical work (Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974) as well as empirical studies (Barnett, 1982; Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers, 1983) strongly indicate that multiple roles actually can reslut in a net gain in well being. These studies suggest that multiple role-takers learn ways of balancing their different role obligations and that the gratifications outweigh the strain. The important issue is how a woman manages her multiple roles and how she commands the resources that she has (Baruch et al. 1983).

The emphasis in the present study was to document how teacher/mothers who were veterans as multiple role-takers experienced their dual role. How did they perceive the interaction of the two roles, and what were the effects, both positive and negative, on teaching and mothering?

Methods

This three year study used ethnographic techniques for in-depth interviewing and analysis. It was carried out in two phases, the second phase based on the results obtained in the first phase. The first phase of the study was exploratory, with the aim of identifying prevalent themes and defining the broad nature of the dual role. Based on this information, the second phase investigated in detail how expectations affect teacher/mothers, both in positive and negative ways. At the end of the study's second year, a third interview was conducted by telephone to collect demographic and related information.

Informants. Eighteen female kindergarten-third grade teachers in a metropolitan area of southeastern United States participated as informants in the study. The following criteria were used in their selection. An informant should: (a) be a female, certified, full-time, K-3rd grade teacher, (b) have completed three or more years of teaching before becoming a parent, (c) currently have at least one child between the ages of three and twelve, (d) be the biological mother of at least one of her children, (e) live in a two wage earner family.

Altogether eighteen K-3rd grade teachers volunteered to participate. Fifteen had been teaching at least three years before the birth of their first child, and three additional informants with shorter initial teaching experience were included [not meeting condition (b)]. The teaching experience for the group ranged from nine to 20 years in the classroom. Six of the informants had one child and twelve had two children. Twelve informants had children

seven years of age or younger. All the informants lived with their husbands who were working.

Material. In the first phase of interviews the questions were open-ended so that the informants would feel free to talk about what they perceived as most important concerning the dual role. For the second phase a standardized interview schedule was developed, based on 30 key statements concerning expectations and selected from the first set of interviews. These interviews included rating and ranking, as well as discussion of the 30 statements.

Each interview in the two sets lasted about one and a half hour and was audio-taped. The tapes were fully transcribed by the investigator and yielded almost 1000 pages of information.

Procedures. The two phases of interviews were conducted half a year apart. The first interview (Exploratory Interview) focused on the effects of working with children 24 hours a day. Analysis of the responses indicated that a major theme of concern was the expectations that the teacher/mothers had on themselves and on others. The second interview (Structured Interview) centered on the extent and in what ways expectations were positive or negative.

Simple frequency calculations of the rating and rank-ordering of the 30 Statements indicated which of the statements were most problematic for the informants. It also became clear which statements were seen as advantages of the dual role. Through the analysis of the transcripts, topics and themes concerning the 30 Statements were developed, and these in turn were checked and cross checked against information contained in the transcripts from both sets of interviews. Finally, demographic and related information was

collected in a third interview, conducted by telephone (Telephone Interview).

Major Findings

The study yielded three major conclusions related to the perceived positive and negative effects of the dual role on teaching and mothering. In their responses the teacher/mothers consistently referred to both of the roles, and often commented that what they had experienced in one role influenced them in the other. The three conclusions were:

First conclusion. The two roles complemented each other and their interaction was mainly beneficial. The positive effects were identified as five distinct advantages, which concerned (1) viewing children as multifaceted individuals both at home and in school, (2) an increased sense of ability to provide for the many needs of children, (3) being realistic in combining theory and practice of child rearing, (4) seeing the teaching profession as advantageous in combination with child rearing, and (5) a sense of increased credibility with the parents of their pupils.

Second conclusion. Expectations involving both roles were seen as ambigous or in certain circumstances unrealistically high. These negative effects of the interaction between the roles were identified as ten specific problem areas. They were ranked in the following order: (1) Having unrealistic expectations of parents of pupils, (2) overreacting because of their high expectations of their own children, (3) disagreements with the teachers of their own children, (4) their own children's expectations of them as mothers,

(5) having realistic expectations of children, (6) being unusually sensitive to their own children's problems, (7) the public's image of teaching as an easy job, (8) parents' expectations of teacher/mothers, (9) their own expectaions of being Super-Mom and Super-Woman, and (10) expectations of husband's participation in child rearing.

Third conclusion. Living with the dual role provided possibilities to gain insight and to learn strategies for coping with and benefitting from both roles. Because of their experience and strong commitment to the two roles, the teacher/mothers had developed a number of strategies for coping with the negative effects of the two roles.

Six strategies were prevalent: (1) Reordering one's priorities, (2) arranging to get paid help with housework, (3) working on husband's participation in child rearing, (4) taking time to do things for oneself, (5) exercising on a regular basis at least twice a week, and (6) participating in some form of support group with other teacher/mothers.

These strategies were seen as ways of managing the stress related to very busy and heavily scheduled lives. Some of the teacher/mothers commented that the strategies would be useful and beneficial for any working parent.

Advantages

One purpose of the study was to identify and describe the effects that the dual role had on teaching and on parenting. As indicated in the first conclusion, five advantages of being a

teacher/mother were identified. They were general in nature, and are described below.

Advantage 1. The teacher/mothers reflected on the combination of personal experience in raising a child, of living through the developmental sequence of a growing child, of having the background of professional knowledge of child development theory, and of having years of experience in the classroom. They realized the importance of taking into account in their daily work not only academic, social, and emotional development, but also the child's home environment.

Advantage 2. As teachers, the informants perceived that parental expectations and support of their children were related to the children's achievements in school. This work-related awareness had influenced the teacher/mothers to spend more "quality time" with their own children.

Advantage 3. Professional reading in child development theory was seen as helpful and had influenced the informants' expectations for their own children in positive ways. Based on both professional knowledge and personal experience, the informants perceived that they had a well developed framework for how children function and grow.

Advantage 4. The teacher/mothers saw their profession as particularly suitable in combination with having children of their own. They also felt that they could provide their own children with better educational opportunities because of their training and experience as teachers.

Advantage 5. Because they were mothers as well as teachers the informants felt more secure in working with parents of pupils about child rearing questions.

Problem Areas

The second conclusion listed ten specific areas that were identified by the teacher/mothers as problematic. These areas concern expectations that were ambiguous or unrealistically high and tended to cause problems for the teacher/mothers. They will be decribed briefly in the order they were ranked.

Problem area 1. The teacher/mothers had certain expectations of parents of pupils, which at times presented painful dilemmas. The teacher/mothers found it difficult to know the boundaries of their professional duties and responsibilities in cases of child neglect. They often had to deal with the pupils' personal problems before any instruction could take place. Though, having first-hand experience of the stress and pain of parenthood, they found themselves less demanding of parents. The wish to do everything they could for their pupils was also difficult to balance against their own familie's needs for time after school hours.

Problem area 2. The teacher/mothers felt that they overreacted when their own children did not meet their expectations. They found it difficult to avoid letting their high standards as teachers influence, in a negative way, what they expected of their own children. They knew that it can be detrimental to push a child too early and too much, but they were well aware of the positive aspects of high expectations.

Problem area 3. When it came to dealing with the teachers of their own children, the boundaries of the two roles were blurred. They had to respect the other teacher as a professional, yet at times, they would question what went on in the child's classroom.

They reported that they had difficulties with knowing when, how, and in which of their two roles to intervene.

Problem area 4. The informants felt strongly that children are entitled to full attention and interest from their parents. But working with children is inevitably taxing, and the teacher/mothers felt that they were drained, both mentally and physically, after a day of teaching small children. In spite of this they were trying very hard to fulfill these expectations.

Problem area 5. Being able to set realistic expectations for what children are able and ready to do was a dilemma. They had high standards both as teachers and as mothers, and they appreciated how expectations influence children. At the same time, they had seen in their classrooms the detrimental effects on children who had been pushed by their parents too soon and too much.

Problem area 6. The teacher/mothers seemed unusally sensitive to problems that their own children might have. Working with children, some with severe difficulties, had made them more aware of early signs of problems. They were concerned about overreacting to behavior of their own children that actually was normal behavior.

Problem area 7. The informants perceived that the public expects them to know everything about children and how to handle and guide them, their own children included. The pressure to be perfect was constant and their job never seemed to end, they felt. The public recognition in terms of money or acknowledgement was not seen as sufficient for the work that is required of them in the dual role.

Problem area 8. The informants perceived some parents of pupils to be insensitive to their need for privacy and time with

their own families. The dilemma included situations when parents insisted on discussing with the teacher/mothers their own personal problems.

Problem area 9. The informants tended to expect themselves to be Super-Mom, Super-Woman. Some had difficulties balancing the two roles. Being a perfect mother and a traditional housewife with a spotless home was difficult for them to combine with their strong professional commitment.

Problem area 10. To be able to succeed in the dual role, the informants perceived that they needed their husbands' help and support with child as well as home responsibilities.

Conclusions

The ethnographic interviewing and the triangulation of methods proved useful in obtaining and analysing the qualitative and detailed information concerning how teacher/mothers perceive their dual role. The study indicated that (a) teacher/mothers have a great deal of expertise about the dual role that can be shared with other teachers at all stages of their careers, and (b) the sharing process in itself is beneficial in clarifying and delineating two closely related roles.

A complete report of this research is available from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106, Ordernumber DA 8508572

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